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THE ARTHURIAN DRAMAS OF EDUARD STUCKEN

Eduard Stucken published his first drama, *Yrsa*, in 1897, when he was thirty two years of age.¹ Neither this nor his other dramas in prose since published give a very definite idea of his talent. *Myrrha*, a fate-play; *Die Gesellschaft des Abbé Chateauneuf*, a tragicomedy dealing with the story of Ninon de L'Enclos; *Astrid*, a drama of Iceland in the eleventh century, are not remarkable works. A volume of *Ballads*, however, in 1898, shows that verse is a more suitable medium for Stucken's expression. In them he shows himself to be master of moods and promises more than ordinary splendor of language. Yet what is gained in art is lost in interest. These ballads are like flowers grown on foreign soil. They bring with them a heavy, depressing, at times terrifying, atmosphere, in which nothing human can survive.

In 1902 Stucken published his first Arthurian drama, entitled *Gawan*. *Lanval* followed this in 1903, and then *Lancelot* in 1908.² Our first impression upon opening any of these three plays is that they are different not only from the other works of their author but perhaps from anything we have ever seen before. We find an easy control of rhyme and rhythm and a frank committal to their effects, an unhindered flow of language, a wealth of imagery, a sensuous, oriental opulence, a scenic suggestiveness that it would be difficult to parallel. Out of his language the poet constructs the mediæval cathedral into which we enter as into the proper gloom, and his language furnishes also the music that aids in subjecting us to his spell. Stucken thus commits himself at the outset to a realm of wonder, of unbounded imagination and fancy. He invites us to survey a wide and mystic scene. We know from the first line that we need not expect simplicity. To some there is nothing in all this ambitious verse but effort, bombast, unnaturalness, to others there is art, expression, beauty.

¹ Cf. *Das literarische Echo*, 11. Jahr, Heft 21-22.

² These dramas, as well as the works mentioned in the first paragraph, can be had of the Erich Reiss Verlag, Berlin-Westend.

In the first place, Stucken's chosen verse in these dramas is anything but simple. It is capable of great freedom. It might be briefly described as an anapestic movement with five stressed syllables. Yet the character of the verse is seldom purely anapestic, since the poet omits at will anywhere from one to five of the unstressed syllables, thus ranging as far as a plain iambic pentameter. The omission of the unstressed syllable is skilfully used by the author to get a retarding effect in his line when he wishes it. The plain pentameter is much more infrequent than the full anapest, but the latter is not allowed to make the rhythm monotonous. To these rhythmic effects must be imagined those of double rhymes, one in the line, often at a pause and rhyming with a word in the following line that may or may not be in an exactly corresponding position; the other at the end of the line, rhyming with the end of the next line. There is usually a pause in the verse, coming at intervals of two or three stressed syllables, though sometimes after the first or fourth, while now and then a line flits by without any breathing space. Stucken manages this verse with great mastery, especially in *Lanval*, the first fifteen lines of which well illustrate its capabilities.

And then the language of these dramas is no less unusual than the metre. It is full of sound and color. There is a distinct effort for color, a choice of highly imaginative words, words that suggest as many beautiful images as possible. A special art is made of this alone. Beauty for its own sake is expressly sought and found. Stucken goes out of his way to discover similes and metaphors of a strange, weird beauty, as if he were determined to arouse us to the presence of something unusual in the object he is describing—it is no ordinary object, or it shall not be seen in the ordinary way. The poet is very insistent that we open our inner vision to the light of poetry that emanates from the thing itself. The language is full of expressions that suggest subtle, hypnotic powers exerted by one person over another. In this respect Stucken's *Ballads* are uncanny, and even the Arthurian dramas do not always escape a suggestion of unhallowed magic. An instance is Fingula's influence over Lanval, when she speaks of her face as a *Giftblumenangesicht*. The poet delights also in elaborate personifica-

tion and metaphor, and at times his fancy runs riot. Take, for example, the following passage, where Lanval summons Fingula to appear at court :—

“Wherever you may be, whether deep beneath the hills, whether fluttering in the heavens you chase upon silvery wings, or diving for pearls you swim on the azure seas; whether you are tuning the gold strings of a harp on a carpet of tulips, or offering your breasts to the calf of the gazelle in the solitude of the forest, where the yellow, matted unicorn shrieks; or whether you fill slim vases of sardonix with your tears, or mirror your pale features in marble fountains, or are combing your long, silken locks of fire, or counting the opals of your rings and bracelets—wherever you may be, whatever you may be doing, leave the costly things and the place where you are, and in your swan-raidment fly over the sea and enter here like one of the wise virgins.”

In the plots of these dramas Stucken has followed well-known sources, though in every case with interesting deviations. These deviations are remarkable in *Gawan*, more so in *Lanval* and of still greater significance in *Lancelot*.

The source for *Gawan* is the old English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This he follows in its main outlines, not hesitating also to use such striking expressions from the original as seemed adapted to his purposes. The first act shows us the Round Table at Christmas-tide, the king unwilling to taste food before some adventure has been related or experienced. Kay announces the arrival of the Green Knight, who offers his remarkable challenge: he is willing to bow his head for one stroke of the axe now, if the knight accepting will receive a stroke from him one year hence at a place to be specified in event of his survival. Gawan accepts the challenge and strikes off the Green Knight's head. The latter sets it on again and rides away with the request that Gawan meet him twelve months hence in a place called the Green Chapel. In the second act Gawan, after many hardships, arrives at the castle of Hautdesert, who is none other than the Green Knight, though Gawan does not know it. This act and the third and the fourth are taken up with the promise that Hautdesert exacts from

Gawan to exchange whatever they may win during the time Gawan remains with him, the host on the chase, the guest in the castle; and further with the temptation of Gawan by Hautdesert's wife, and his successful resistance. He fails, however, in one little particular: he accepts as a gift the girdle of Hautdesert's wife, because she promises that it will charm his life against all attempts, even those of magic. When the exchange of booty is effected, Gawan gives faithfully, according to his pledge, the kiss he had received from Marie, but he retains the girdle—though even this is much against his will—and is thus guilty of violating his word. The fifth act finally shows us what occurs when Gawan reaches the Green Chapel.

The most interesting deviations from the source are found from certain parts of the third act to the end of the play, and have to do with a subject familiar to all readers of recent German dramas: the problem of death. Indeed, the possibilities of this theme in the story must have been one of its most attractive features for the author. The original merely offers the suggestion—love of life tempts Gawan to offend against his knightly honor. It is this situation that Stucken seizes upon to introduce a good deal of modern thought about death. Marie de Hautdesert in her temptation of Gawan presents with all conceivable eloquence the contrast between life in its fullness, where sin itself is a virtue, and death, which is extinction. "Beautiful," she says, "is the Angel of sin." When Gawan pleads that he wishes, should he die young, to inherit the kingdom of heaven, this is her reply: "That you are pure and without blemish is your misfortune. Of what avail to you in the dull coffin is Heaven's favor? In the desolate vault, of what avail is Heaven's blessing? In the crypt and in the mouldy air fall no showers of blossoms. Can Heaven restore to you the light of the sun?" What is the value of a life that was never once drunk with roses and wine, that never beheld the glacier-summits and the abysses of existence?—

Euch hat nie Frau Venus berückt, Hörselbergs Zierde;
Und ihr habt nie das Tollkraut gepflückt unersättlicher Gierde.

The fifth act shows still better how great a charm this problem of death exercised over the poet's imagination. Gawan,

realizing more fully than the English original the extent of the sin he has committed in violating his pledge for fear of death, approaches the Green Chapel as a man conscious of his doom. He has closed accounts with life and sees in death only the just atonement for his wrongdoing. The Green Chapel is a place of horror—a kind of cell in a rocky cliff, before which is a graveyard surrounded by an iron fence. It is midnight, the appointed time, and Gawan is scarcely able to discern the ivy that grows thickly about the entrance. As the door of the chapel opens with a grating noise the darkness is illumined by a flood of green light which proceeds from a hanging lamp in the interior. Toward the front of the chamber is a coffin, surrounded by candelabra. In the background an altar, and in a niche above this a painted wooden image of the Virgin Mary. Gawan enters as if he had “expected something else.” He confesses his sins to the Mother of Christ and then calls aloud for his adversary to appear. Twelve strokes of a clock are heard and the Green Knight arises from the coffin. Undismayed the hero bows his head to receive the stroke of the axe. But this is never delivered, for the Virgin descends from her niche to declare him worthy of life. The Green Knight acquiesces with Mephistophelian irony (the only touch, by the way, of this trait in his character), and we now learn that the whole conflict has resulted from a wager between the Virgin and Death, who is Hautdesert. God, who sends “temptation as a blessing,” had given Gawan, like Job, into Death’s hands to be tested. Death thinks out the severest trial. He persuades the Virgin to clothe a sinful, freeborn sylph in her own pure form, and it is this creature who, in the person of Marie de Hautdesert, had all but brought the hero to his fall. Yet, as the Virgin had forseen, he had withstood the dangerous lures of life and conquered in his soul the fear of death. Now he is worthy to drink from the Holy Grail. As this ceremony is performed, the curtain falls on the closing act.

In the original, Hautdesert and his wife are only human. In his castle lives Morgan le Fay, skilled in magic. She is responsible for the adventure, having sent Hautdesert to Camelot “to test the truth of the renown that is spread abroad of the

Round Table. She taught me this marvel, to betray your wits, to vex Ginover and fright her to death by the man who spake with his head in his hand." In making this important change, Stucken was of course under the spell of the fascination exercised by the figure of death over much of modern art—death, as one of the most mysterious phases of the entire problem of life, which again has shaken us out of our complacency as rudely as if it had never been touched. So many of the German writers seem anxious to read into this phase some human reason, and Death appears on the scene again and again—not as the skeleton of Everyman, but, as if by common consent, in kindlier form. For one, he teaches that he is a renewer of life, who prevents a single form from usurping the place of new and varied forms; for another, he calls himself the great god of the soul, present in all genuine moments of life, teaching how to live. In our play, too, he has human qualities, and though an enemy of Gawain, gives him good advice and warning. Yet this *Mysterium*, as Stucken calls it, differs from most of the death-dramas in showing the triumph of life, while they show the victory of death. In addition to the general popularity of the figure of death, there was, we may add, a special fitness in changing Hautdesert into Death in this instance: the victory of the hero over the fear of death could not be made more complete than by having him vanquish his adversary in person. Thus Stucken simply acted on the suggestion contained in his source.

If in *Gawan* the poet was somewhat bound by a legend, the general tendency of which was determined by Christian faith, his treatment of *Lanval* allowed him to make his characters more often representative of modern moods: life for life's sake, rather sensuous than moral, rather restive than serene, and when crossed by misfortune rather rebellious than resigned. The outline of *Lanval* is briefly this:—Lanval is a young knight of the Round Table, whose fortunes need mending. For this reason Briant, his brother, and his uncle, Baldewin, have planned for him to marry Lionors, the niece of Arthur and the sister of Agravain. But Lanval has united himself with Fingula, a swan-princess, over whom he obtained power by stealing

her swan-raiment. He is bound to her by a promise of secrecy. Unfortunately, however, Lionors is very much in love with Lanval, and Arthur offers her to him to wife. He is compelled before the assembled court to give his reason for not accepting her. He is taunted by Queen Ginover when he refuses to tell the name of his wife and where she has made her abode. In answer to these taunts he forgets himself so far as to declare that his wife is the most lovely woman living, far more lovely than the Queen herself. The latter receives this as might be expected, and Lanval is now forced to summon his wife that the Round Table may decide upon the issue. He calls Fingula, but she does not appear, because, as Lionors later suggests, Lanval would expose the delicate flower of their happiness to the common gaze. Lanval is saved from the loss of his honor and expulsion from the Round Table only by a speedy and secret alliance with Lionors. The task of making this plausible is solved well enough. When the judges bid him produce his wife or be declared guilty of perjury, he can point to Lionors. At this point, however, Agravain rises to accuse Lanval of double marriage. Driven to despair and contempt of life by all that has happened so suddenly, he denies all knowledge of Fingula, and declares his supposed experience to have been a dream. This statement is gainsaid by a marvelous sign. In a speech full of grandiose irony and rebellion against destiny, Lanval challenges a second Daniel to enter and interpret this sign. A knight in black armor enters upon this challenge and fights with Lanval. Lanval slays the knight, who is then seen to be Fingula. Her swan-brothers appear and bear her off to Avelun, where alone Lanval shall ever see her again. Lanval's last words, just before he is killed by Agravain, his implacable enemy, are those of bitter protest against his experience and of intense hatred of Lionors, who was throughout actuated only by the purest affection for him.

What Stucken owes in the main to well-known sources and what he has chosen to invent will be plain enough without further comment. As far as clearness goes *Lanval* is open to more serious objection than *Gawan* or *Lanzelot*. Even the beautiful language, which in this play attains its greatest perfection, can-

not make us forget this at every point. For example, the real nature of Fingula, the swan-girl, is not plain. A certain degree of mystery is necessary, of course, but the description Fingula offers of herself at her first meeting with Lanval eludes every effort of the imagination to discern any certain creature, whether sylph, fairy or woman. She is as old as the fairy flower that grows in primeval waters, eternally young like Astarte; she longs for the peace that death brings, yet is immortal; she yearns for the bliss of love, but this is not for her—we do not know why. She is a beautiful horror, a childish devil. In each of her limbs dwells a witch. To kiss her is to renounce God, to love her is to be damned, for the horrors of her breast are seven times seven. This is undoubtedly a bit of poetic frenzy. And besides this, there are obscure parts of the plot which would occur readily to any reader.

But all this does not overbalance the beauties of the drama in other respects, and *Lanval* is in some ways one of the most adequate expressions to be found of life as viewed by German poets of recent years. Throughout it breathes that distinctly modern atmosphere in which the sensuous and the spiritual blend with such harmony that one seems to be resolved into the other. The emotions of its persons might be termed, if we may borrow a word, monistic. There is but the slightest trace of Christian dualism, and that is rather traditional than vital. Life is conceived of as an organic unity, a harmonious process where little is heard of a conflict between mind and sense. The tendency is pantheistic. Motives of morality yield to motives of personality. There are no eternal truths, but only ever-recurring emotions. "I fear not Belial, not the thunders of God nor the day of doom if I may possess you", declares Lanval in answer to Fingula's warning. These lines and this character give a pretty complete expression to a certain kind of modern renaissance spirit. Tolstoi notices this resemblance in the following characteristic language: "The chief mistake made by men of the highest classes of the so-called Renaissance, — a mistake which we are continuing to make at the present time, did not consist in their having ceased to value religious art and to ascribe any meaning to it but in this that in place of this absent religious art they

put an insignificant art which had for its aim nothing but man's enjoyment."³ This applies, of course, in a sense to the writers of the present day. Only, the present-day writers are even more radical, for they attempt a total revaluation of motives and actions. Sin is no longer sin; virtue no longer virtue. Fidelity to the strong, pure passion of the heart is the chief article of the creed. Fear of death and of what may come after it yields to fear of a passionless life. Great experience is sought at any cost. "I will smile meantime, until fortune destroys me, the cruel fortune that has taken us prisoner will be blissful torment." Lanval swears not by God, but by the tears of his beloved. To Agravain he says:—

Ich kenne nicht Zwang.
Ich gehorchte meinem Herzen mein Leben lang.

We do not see persons that move against a background of settled principles, amusing themselves within defined limits; rather such as are inclined to overstep all limits hitherto accepted, and seeking new principles to accord with the needs of a new experience. Lanval represents the despair of finding such principles. He has none of the calm faith that supports Gawan. In the last moment of his life he bursts forth with a bitter arraignment of the powers that shaped his destiny. Nor does he find rest until through the gates of death he follows his swan-princess to the mystic shores of Avelun. This, too, being the best answer that much of modern poetry has for its great questioners and sufferers—a vision of rest unruffled by any passion: death, cessation, Avelun.

The confession of this personal creed might be illustrated by many other passages from *Lanval*, especially by the beautiful character of Lionors. But even more strikingly by the characters and story of *Lancelot*. This drama might have been called *Lancelot and Elaine*, dealing as it does with that episode. Yet this title would have been too narrow, since there are crowded into this tense work the fortunes of Arthur and Ginover as well. Stucken has combined the two Elaine stories in *Morte d'Arthur*, and added the destinies of Elaine, the daughter of Pelles (Book

³ *What is Art?*

XI, Chs. i, ii), to those of Elaine le Blank. (Book II, Ch. xv, has also furnished certain suggestions.) Pelles is changed to Anfortas, who is thus made the father of Elaine and Lavaine. The first act and part of the second are laid in the Grail Castle. One important result of these changes is that Elaine has greater rights in Lancelot through the birth of a son to him, and hence the situation between Lancelot and Ginover is made more interesting. Ginover, feeling her power over him wane, resorts to deception in order to shield him from Elaine's purer love. It is the discovery of this deception that determines Lancelot's final break with her. Lancelot is a man who vainly strives to free himself from a baneful influence. In truth he loves Elaine and divines, though dimly, that she stands above all other women of earth. When this bursts upon him in its full light Elaine is already on her last earthly pilgrimage in the funeral barge.

Lancelot is entirely a character of Stucken's own making. In the old book he is praised as a model knight because of his unremitting service of one woman. He deceives the king without much compunction. The shade of remorse and discontent that Tennyson brings into his portrait is well known—his features showed a trace of the "great and guilty love he bore the queen," and he thought of what might have been had Elaine crossed his way before. It is here that Stucken takes his starting point. Lancelot becomes a veritable Tannhäuser seeking deliverance from the Venusberg. Like Tannhäuser, too, though with greater reason, he is rejected by the highest religious authority (here the Holy Grail), and returns to his sinful life.—

Ihr zwingt mich ohne Erbarmen mit wildem Fluche,
Dass ich in Frau Venus' Armen das Vergessen suche!

And finally, like Tannhäuser, he is saved by the death of a pure woman.

Everything in Lancelot's actions hinges on the creed of personality. Many things are allowed by this creed, only not infidelity to one's self. Everybody in the drama is tested by this standard. Lancelot has really been false to himself in his love for Ginover, for he has deceived the friend of his choice. It is this that makes him wretched:—

Wär der Ehebruch verzeihlich,—der Freundesverrat
Wär es nimmermehr!

Yet this creed of personality, like others not without its contradictions, binds him to his sin. That which has given him hours of genuine pleasure he can never renounce and deny.—

Schön waren, unvergesslich, der Schände Nächte!
Ein Glück so unermesslich gewährt nur das Schlechte!

So in the very presence of the Holy Grail itself he refuses to forswear the bliss he has had. This scene is a veritable fiat of the personal creed. Rather than abjure, Lancelot will give up the blessing of the Grail. "I have humbled myself too deeply—I will do it no longer. I will not curse what has made me happy. . . . I am firm; no power in the world can force me! It would seem a disgrace to me should I weep for what I have done; a cowardly thing, treason of myself should I repent of the joyous torments of my life and grieve at the tomb of my pleasure. No,—a defiant pride even swells my heart that the first woman of the world was my paramour." And that which finally determines his break with the Queen is a motive of the same kind: his relation to Elaine. He fears that he has slain her soul, and when he realizes his love for her, the abhorrence of the Queen that the Holy Grail could not wring from him he now confesses of his own accord.

The character of Elaine is the most beautiful in the drama. Stucken has here made use of a type familiar enough in German literature—the woman whose life is absorbed by one love. From the peasant's daughter in Hartman, to her counterpart, Ottogeb, in Hauptmann, this type has fascinated good and indifferent writers. In Elaine Stucken has added a worthy representative. The scenes in which she figures show him to be master of the language of the heart. Elaine is naïve in the least as in the most significant of her actions. She is not bothered by scruples of propriety or appearance when there is a question of getting what she wants. She plays at nothing, for her it is always a matter of life and death. Not for the sake of her father, not even for the salvation of the entire Grail Kingdom, would she sacrifice her virgin honor, but for the love and salvation of Lancelot she does it. She is one of those persons who

are all soul, who are dangerous to have about us because they are the most absolute test of our nature. They never bear malice, yet to do them wrong is the greatest misfortune that can befall us. They serve no custom, being a law unto themselves, and are ready to bring the last sacrifice even unto death. Such a character is Elaine in this drama. She is indeed a wonderful person in *Morte d'Arthur* and in Tennyson. There are few more touching appeals than her last letter. But in Stucken's drama the entire situation, and hence every detail of it, gains greater pathos by the fact that she is the mother of Lancelot's child, that she has for his sake endured exile from home and all the miseries of hunger and cold, that she has won his love and is just barely kept from him by the jealousy of the Queen. And this gloom is set off by a lovely spiritual light, for her final triumph, though bought with death, is absolute.

Guinevere, too, is a thorough woman of the modern renaissance. She is not afraid of sin, of discovery, of the King's wrath. She fears only one thing, the loss of Lancelot's love, only one person, Elaine. She fights a losing battle and is conscious of her weakness. Hence she is driven to deceive Lancelot himself, and this is a kind of a deception that the religion of personality forbids. Guinevere excommunicates herself. Elaine, on the other hand, remains true to herself, and these two characters make an effective contrast.

But, after all, the view taken by the modern renaissance of the relation between Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere is shown most clearly in the attitude of Arthur himself. This is entirely different from that of the moral Arthur in Tennyson, and it is here that Stucken goes to the extreme of the modern standpoint. His Arthur will not even question Lancelot's relation to the Queen. When certainty is in his hands he throws away the means of assuring himself. He goes so far as to declare Lancelot innocent even though he should be proved guilty. "Is there innocent guilt?" asks Agravaine, and the King replies: "Not the deed, the will decides." There is a higher justice, such as we may hope for from God, which determines guilt by motive alone, not by the appearance of the deed. Thus Arthur lays the basis for his final attitude to Lancelot and Guinevere.

Who understands all will forgive all. Lancelot by his pilgrimage to the Grail has proved his desire for purity—that must decide. It would have been better, of course, had he been successful, but “where higher powers make sport of us, all guilt grows pale.” And as for Ginover, he assumes the larger share of guilt to himself—had he not neglected her? Had he not repelled her by his coldness? And as for guilt, what is the use of talking about guilt at all in the matter?—

Nicht Lieben und Lieben—Gesckick ist's! Wer kann ihm entrinnen?

Thus the modern writer joins hands with Malory, for “that is true, said the King and many Knights: Love is free in himself and will never be bounden; for when he is bounden he loseth himself.”

This referring everything to the personal is strongly marked in contemporaneous poetry, love, friendship, the sensuous, death—these things are concrete: duty is an abstraction. Richard Hovey makes Launcelot say:—

“Duty! The word is colder than the moon.”

This implies it is wrong to stifle the personal for the sake of duty. Yet there is no attempt on Stucken's part to grasp and solve the fundamental problem of society such as we find in the beautiful fragment of Hovey's lofty work. Stucken leaves the state out of the matter. Perhaps in the ideal realm of his dreams there is no state.

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